indianbuddhisthf@gmail.com

IBH Forum
Indo Buddhist Heritage Forum

Thangka Painting art and Visualization practice

Leave a Comment / Soft Power / February 4, 2024

Thangkas are paintings of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, dharma protectors, and mandalas made on scroll canvas in Tibetan Buddhist culture and tradition in Tibet. These thangka paintings are drawn with a specific form, expression, and symbolic meaning to communicate spiritual significance about the Buddhist historical narrative. The aesthetic purpose of these thangka paintings is to identify with various deities' name and their significant spiritual role, their contribution to Buddha's teaching. For example, thangka of historical Buddha in meditation posture, Manjushree as wisdom aspect of Buddha's teaching, and Amitabha as Buddha of infinite light and bliss. Especially in Vajrayana tantric tradition, Padmasambhava is depicted as tantric master guru and many other wrathful and peaceful tantric dharma protector deities.

These thangka paintings are mainly used in monasteries by monks and nuns, and all Tibetan lay Buddhist householders at their altar to visualize and pray. For yoga practitioners, thangka paintings are explicitly used for visualization meditation to realize the creation and completion stage of inner tantra. This creation and completion stage are essences of Vajrayana Buddhism. Their practice is based on individual practitioner's inclinations and identification towards specific deities and their disposition of enlightenment mind.

In the modern world, antique thangka paintings are a source of the invaluable art market from Tibetan Buddhists' cultural treasure and heritage. Also, contemporary thangka arts are big business in many Buddhist countries, the western Buddhist world, and Tibetan community.

This thangka painting tradition derived from Tibetan Buddhist culture from the first establishment of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet in the 9th century. At first, it was not considered as an art form of any aesthetic purpose then. But rather as the practice and identification of the spiritual identity of specific deities to pay homage and reverence for their contribution in enlightenment teaching to be free from samsara and benefit all sentient beings.

The concept of thangka painting art was introduced from early Indian Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet. As it was being transmitted from early Indian Buddhist tradition in India. The thangka art tradition was adopted by Tibetans in form of the Vajrayana practice of inner tantras, which utilize detailed visualization practice of the creation stage and dissolution stage of Yidam deity meditation. An individual meditation practitioner must have detailed formation and expression of Yidam in his mind to connect with specific deity in visual form like thangka painting. This tantric visualization meditation must be the primary source of inspiration and foundation of the systematic formation of thangka art. Thus, its culture and tradition of thangka painting art were introduced in Tibet and the Himalayan region in the 9th century.

However, nowadays, people use this thangka painting at the monastery's altar to depict Buddha's life story. At the main gate of any monastery, the visual symbolic teaching of twelve linked dependent origination and wheel of life is painted. On the monastery's walls, the metaphorical meaning of cosmic dimension and diagram of the mandala is shown in the form of thangka art. Some thangka represents many manifestation aspects of Guru Padmasambhava to make a spiritual connection with the enlightenment essence of his mind. Others connect with the historical Buddha or Vajra yogini or any other individual deity by visually thinking in detail with one's mind.

In this way, one can further cultivate devotion to Buddhas, Bodhisattva, tantric masters, and female buddhas, and to their enlightenment mind, which is the source of happiness and freedom from suffering and samsara. Thangka paintings serve this purpose well by connecting our mind with Buddhas and their precious enlightened mind via visualization meditation practice to realize the essence of the primordial nature of mind.

The same is with the lay household family of Tibetan Buddhist believers. They keep this thangka at the altar along with a statue of Buddha to visualize the Buddha's presence, pray and think of them in visual form and cultivate inner devotion, identify with bodhisattva and their enlightened mind. Spiritually how thangka paintings are used to invoke Buddha's blessing, cultivate faith with the support of the thangka art form to identify and connect with Enlightenment aspects of our own Buddha-nature.

Antique thangka artifacts are big business globally, especially to the Buddhist community and Buddhist art collectors and historians. Many antique thangka paintings are being collected by private collectors, culture centers, museums, and Buddhist monasteries to preserve the cultural heritage and spiritual identity of Tibetan Buddhist's civilization. And also, its literary contribution to humanity via enlightenment society and compassionate culture in the form of art. These antique thangka arts carry the visual narrative story of ancient Mahayana Buddhist culture of Nalanda tradition to the western world. Those who are interested in Buddhist art history or art collection in the West can see a big business opportunity with the invaluable significant Asian art market of antique thangka and buddha statues. They are preserving them as a treasure trove with a keen interest to learn more about Tibetan Buddhism and its precious teaching of enlightened mind. Thangka arts carry invaluable the essence of Himalayan Buddhist culture and its literary narrative of their contribution made by Nalanda Mahayana Buddhism which is the source of Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

The contemporary thangka paintings are also a significant business market globally. Modern thangkas are being commissioned by many Tibetan monasteries and their meditation centers to create an atmosphere of Buddhist spirituality with its community. An environment of enlightened society with thangka decorations and iconography of Buddhist saints, buddhas, and dharma protectors. Many Tibetan families and communities are buying lots of

contemporary thangka arts for their personal use at the altar to identify with their Buddhist heritage, culture, and tradition. So, there is a vast market in the Tibetan community and western Tibetan Buddhist followers of contemporary thangka arts to represent rich Buddhist heritage and culture in both the West and East.

Thangka painting art, therefore, is a unique cultural and spiritual Buddhist tradition of Tibet and its civilization. It has made an immense contribution to Tibetan Buddhism literature as systematic visualization practice of the creation and completion stage. On top of that, it stands itself as a form of spiritual art medium and expression of a spiritual narrative of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Dharma protectors, and cosmic formation of mandalas symbolism. In modern days, antique thangka art and contemporary thangkas have become a cultural treasure and spiritual heritage of Tibetan Buddhism, which came directly from ancient Nalanda university in India. We, the Tibetan Buddhist community feel proud of our unique Thangka art and its beautiful tradition. It's indeed, our cultural treasure and spiritual heritage of Tibetan Buddhism in the visual medium with a spiritual narrative story.

Article by

Dawa Yakpa Lama

A Truth Seeker & Filmmaker at A Mirror & Reflection Studio.

(Links :YouTube)

← Previous Post

Next Post →

Leave a Comment

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Type here..

Name*

Email*

Website

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

Post Comment »

Explore

Search

Latest Posts

Revealing the Essence: Longchen Rabjam's Philosophical Discourse on Phenomenal Existence

April 5, 2024

In the intricate tapestry of philosophical thought, few voices resonate as...

Read more

Navigating the Depths of Buddhist Sacred Texts

March 22, 2024

Exploring the Rich Tapestry of Buddhist Sacred Texts

Buddhism, one of... Read more

Discovering Tranquility in the Chaos: Embracing Buddhism in Southern California

March 8, 2024

In the hustle and bustle of modern life, many of us... Read more

Social Media Share

© Copyright 2022 IBH Forum